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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5758
INFO RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY 3168
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0303
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 9997
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 6973
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5051
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3634
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0795
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3720
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 1031
RUEHGP/AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE PRIORITY 5675
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2800
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7548
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5250
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0156
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1931
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2017

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: LTTE ATTACKS AIR BASE USING LIGHT
AIRPLANES

REF: COLOMBO 484

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (SBU) At approximately 12:45 am on March 26, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) conducted their first known aerial attack on Sri Lankan military targets. The LTTE used two small fixed-wing aircraft to drop four bombs on Katunayake Air Force Base adjacent to Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport. The Tiger airplanes reportedly returned to their base in the north (probably at Iranamadu) after completing their bombing run. The military-run Media Center for National Security reports that three airmen were killed and 16 wounded. There were no civilian casualties. Hangars holding GSL MiG-27 and Kfir aircraft were the likely target, but government sources report that no fighter planes were put out of commission and airport runways were unharmed.

¶2. (SBU) The attack did hit the aeronautical engineering building at the airbase, causing a fire, and reportedly damaged windscreens on some GSL helicopters, which will be airworthy after minor repairs. The GSL temporarily closed the adjacent civilian airport as a precautionary measure. It was reopened approximately three hours later. On the LTTE's web portal, Tamilnet, LTTE military spokesman Irasaiah Ilanthiraiyan claimed credit for the attack and threatened more as long as the GSL conducts air raids on LTTE-controlled territory. Pictures of the Tiger airmen, ordinance, and airplanes are also posted on Tamilnet.

¶3. (U) As a result of the attack, Cathay Pacific Airways suspended its flight operations to and from Colombo until further notice. Cathay Pacific will fly its remaining passengers in Colombo to Bangkok and Hong Kong on March 27. A Cathay Pacific press release stated, "Safety is a top

priority at Cathay Pacific and a careful assessment of the situation will be made before services are resumed." No other airline has suspended its operations.

14. (C) COMMENT: Other sources reported that in fact, some Sri Lankan Air Force jet aircraft may have sustained some damage. A defense analyst told us that one of the bombs did not detonate; it was disassembled and proved to be full of C-4 explosive. The LTTE attack using airplanes represents another escalation in the conflict and does not bode well for near-term peace prospects. However, it appears the LTTE took considerable care not to harm civilians in this attack. Reports of the LTTE's owning two small planes have been circulating for some time, and GSL military sources told us several weeks ago they were concerned about the possibility of an attack like today's. The LTTE undoubtedly were responding to what they saw as the provocation of a government probing attack on March 23 into their northern territory, near Mannar (reftel). While the damage inflicted appears minimal, the propaganda advantage for the LTTE military forces, which have suffered numerous reverses in recent weeks, is great and will boost their morale.

15. (SBU) The EAC met on March 26 (septel) and determined that a recommendation against travelers using the international airport was not warranted since this attack specifically targeted the military airfield.

BLAKE